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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WLAWRENCE), D (JOST), DRL, NEA/PI

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KMPI KDEM TS

SUBJECT: THE DEPUTY SECRETARY'S MEETING WITH TUNISIAN PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI

REF: TUNIS 730

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson, for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (U) May 19, 2006; 10:00 A.M.; CARTHAGE, TUNISIA.

¶2. (U) Participants:

U.S.

The Deputy Secretary
Ambassador William Hudson

TUNISIA

President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali
Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, Minister of State, Special Advisor to the President of the Republic
Ossama Romdhani, Official Spokesman of the Presidency of the Republic

¶3. (C) Summary: In a May 19 meeting with Deputy Secretary Zoellick, Tunisian President Ben Ali said that Tunisia's reform process will continue, and that "all our means are devoted to human development." Although he characterized the US-Tunisian relationship as "excellent" he accused the USG of bias in interpreting Tunisia's human rights record. He said USG criticism of human rights in Tunisia "cast a small shadow" on the relationship, marking the first time Ben Ali has been so direct in regards to difficulties in our relationship. Deputy Secretary Zoellick said that as a friend we want to listen to Tunisia's perspective and that we should have a broad spectrum bilateral dialogue, including both political and economic topics. The Deputy Secretary and President Ben Ali also discussed counter-terrorism cooperation and a potential role for Tunisia in a UN peacekeeping mission in Sudan. End Summary.

President Defends Tunisia's Human Rights Record

¶4. (C) President Ben Ali opened by saying that Tunisia and the U.S. enjoyed "excellent relations." However, he said, he perceived a bias on the part of the U.S. in interpreting Tunisia's human rights record. He said, "we believe in a comprehensive approach to human rights," and criticized the Embassy for not associating with the right contacts on human rights issues in Tunisia. Ben Ali noted that when compared to Morocco and Algeria, Tunisia is "doing well" on human rights.

¶5. (C) Ben Ali said that Tunisia is committed to freedom of expression. He said that opposition press in Tunisia is very

critical of the GOT, however the GOT has not seized their publications and has even provided funding. (NOTE: Opposition newspaper al-Mawkif, the most openly GOT-critical paper in Tunisia, has in the past occasionally been seized, and receives no GOT funding. END NOTE.) Ben Ali stated that "no one is jailed for their views in Tunisia", and that US criticism is seldom based on the real facts in a case. He said, "Tunisia has no political prisoners, and all prisoners are criminals." Noting that the case of jailed lawyer/activist Mohammed Abbou (Ref A) had been raised during the Deputy Secretary's meeting at the MFA (septel), Ben Ali said he "had not been aware of the case", and learned about it from the papers. He claimed that Abbou was jailed for assault of a colleague and said the GOT would follow the rule of law for all its citizens: "The law must be applied to all and cannot be tailored based on views or the position of individuals." He concluded that while the bilateral relationship is "outstanding" with all the help Tunisia has given on Palestine and Libya, some issues cause a "small shadow" on our relationship. "When the Department of State takes a position, it has a lot of credibility in the world, and therefore it is obligated to look at all positions and facts.

Political Reform

¶6. (C) The Deputy Secretary noted the extraordinary accomplishments that have been made in Tunisia, particularly in the area of education, and in spreading these accomplishments throughout the country. He continued that although Tunisia has struggled with radical Islam, as the country moves forward, Tunisian citizens would look for a more open political environment. The Deputy Secretary added, "if people cannot participate in a legitimate system of

political debate, they often become disaffected and turn to radical Islam." He continued, saying we hoped that the GOT would create opportunities for dialogue with NGOs and the press, noting that for U.S.-Tunisian relations to have fuller expression, we need to enhance our dialogue. In this context, the Deputy Secretary mentioned allowing IRI to operate in Tunisia as a way to show more broadened political participation which would not threaten security.

¶7. (C) The Deputy Secretary said that it is important to always have the facts, and that is why we want to deepen our dialogue. He said it is the USG perspective that the GOT legal system is "over reactive". He noted that the GOT has a good story and should let its people participate in the political process. He then used as an example the consultative process on Tunisia's ten-year economic program which was described by Development and International Cooperation Minister Jouini (septel), saying it was an excellent idea and might be useful as a model for the political realm. The Deputy Secretary said we have seen movements of democracy in Eastern Europe and Asia, that these movements would continue and he hoped Tunisia could participate. Ben Ali responded that the reform process will continue, and the GOT asked for some understanding during the process as "all our means are devoted to human developments -- mistakes should not be used to criticize the entire system". The Deputy Secretary concluded that he greatly respects what Tunisia has accomplished. "We must listen to our friends and learn their perspective -- that is why I suggest we restart a high-level dialogue, incorporating the economic sphere as well."

Counter-terrorism

¶8. (C) Ben Ali said that Tunisia has long taken a strong position on terrorism and that the U.S. and Tunisia have had great bilateral cooperation on terrorism issues. He said: "History, particularly events in Iraq, Egypt and Palestine, has vindicated our approach." The Deputy Secretary said he hoped we could deepen our cooperation on counter terrorism.

Sudan

¶9. (C) Turning to Sudan, the Deputy Secretary noted that as a member of the Arab League and African Union, Tunisia is well placed to help Sudan create a better future for its people and to follow through on the recent accords. The Deputy Secretary mentioned that he hoped there would be a UN

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peacekeeping operation in Sudan and hoped that the GOT could participate. Ben Ali responded that Tunisia "is following up on Sudan in the Arab League." He said that Chad was playing a negative role. He commented that Tunisian forces have participated in peacekeeping operations in the past and "are always willing." (COMMENT: The GOT traditionally only participates in UN peacekeeping, and will probably follow the Arab League position on this.)

¶10. (U) The Deputy Secretary's party has cleared this cable.

HUDSON